

# Expanding the Toolkit: Strategies Beyond the Compact City

As emergent models of urban development continue to proliferate across the globe and depart from the more time-honored envelope of the traditional compact city, the canvas of action for designers necessarily expands and diversifies. The customary twentieth-century divide between cultivated city and its peripheries has, in past decades, been partially supplanted by new morphologies fueled by urbanization pressures at the

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scale of the mega-region. Fast-paced forms of metropolitan development, paired with new “geopolitical annexation” and greater economic exchanges between hinterland and city, have transformed the urban-suburban-rural triad. Today we can see a complex system of loosely associated urban spreads and densities connected by expansive infrastructures. This has fundamentally altered the original components of the post-World War II suburb and its social, economic, and spatial dynamics. This new dispersed urban model—regional in scale but not in character—is primarily driven by off-center, multinodal economic engines, large-scale resource extraction and distribution, and heavyweight regional mobility networks. The combination of all of these elements produces a mega-region model of urbanization, which relies less and less on the financial and functional support of the traditional compact city. The “traditional” city at the turn of the twenty-first century witnessed a period of reinvention, coalescing a plethora of strategies and scales to restructure its long-established quarters. The vast majority of the urbanized terrain, however continues to operate under the influence of watered-down postwar functionalist schemas. Given this framework, the moment is ripe to redefine the role of the urban project for the first half of the twenty-first century. How are we to approach this task? What should guide the architect conceiving new relationships among existing urban parts? How can the architect act as a critical agent, in regard to the spatial particularities of the urban parts themselves and within the larger expanded urban field? What scales of the built environment must an architect demonstrate expertise within to contribute to an ever-expanding urban field?

In the last twenty years, we have observed an unprecedented transformation in the design disciplines affiliated with city-making. The clasp around disciplinary silos prescribed by the postwar era, which strongly defined the boundaries of each discipline—architect as author of buildings, landscape architect as creator of open space, civil engineer as builder of heavy infrastructure, and urban planner as manager of public works—has been released in the past two decades.<sup>1</sup> In its place, a new dialogue has emerged between designers, where scalar overlaps between disciplines define design expertise and collaboration. Such an overlap reflects the trans-scalar nature of contemporary design practice. While this in no way means that one discipline can replace the task of the other, it has allowed for a new interface among different project components, resulting in built fragments that are something greater than simply the sum of their parts. The High Line in New York City—where derelict mobility infrastructure was recycled into a new recreational space—is an example of such a trans-scalar collaboration between landscape architects and architects.<sup>2</sup> In 2010, the Spanish city of Madrid chose to sink five kilometers of highway running along the edge of the Manzanares River. In this case, a collaboration between *Burgos & Garrido Arquitectos* and West 8 provided an open space on top of the highway that gave the river back to the city and provided a new green corridor at the scale of the region. Or take the Arnhem Central Station in Arnhem, The Netherlands. Here, the UN Studio brought together a multiplicity of mobility infrastructures, from rail to bicycles, in a single intermodal space, charged with a high-density programmatic brief. All three projects exemplify the productive overlap among disciplines. While some are led by architects, others by landscape architects, and still more by engineering firms, the synthesis generated from the dialogues has clear implications for how to better integrate the trans-scalar nature of urban projects.

The successful reemergence of the urban project is undeniable. The last two decades have provided us with an extensive list of well-executed works of an exceptional diversity in scope, scale, and method. Yet if we examine these projects more carefully, the vast majority of these interventions still operate within the boundaries of the traditional compact city. They function within a set of conventional concepts of urban density. Today's new frontier of urbanization, however, goes beyond the boundaries of the traditional city. From a dispersed urban-rural hybrid along the edges of the Ganges River<sup>3</sup> in India to the rapid urbanization of the South American hinterland—due to major investment in transcontinental mobility infrastructure—urbanized landscapes beyond the traditional metropolis are currently being transformed into a condition that is neither urban nor rural. They are a new form of urbanization in dire need of definition. Among the many new spatial dynamics that are currently arising within this new frontier of urbanization, three appear to be the most salient.

One is the transformation of once small and largely forgotten regional cities and towns by new regional nodes. A case in point is the city of Iquitos, Peru. Until recently it was accessible only by air or boat. This frontier town at the edge of the Amazon River peaked during the rubber boom of

the first decade of the twentieth-century, as a smaller counterpart to the Brazilian city of Manaus. Major investments to improve the navigability of the Amazon and Napo Rivers, paired with road improvements in the Andes Mountains and on the Ecuadorian coast, have reframed Iquitos as a cardinal port city along the new Manta (Ecuador)-to-Manaus transoceanic corridor. Many areas in China are witnessing similar effects: the creation of new industrial and service economy towns are reshaping the dynamics of what once were small villages. From Asia to the Americas, new regional nodes are redefining existing settlements and centers of industry and trade.

The second dynamic is that the “over-infrastructuralizing” of the hinterlands, in the service of resource extraction, produces overscaled projects. An excellent example of this process is the rose industry along high-altitude rural land in the Northern Andes Mountains. Flowers, a global luxury commodity, currently occupy an extensive surface and are continuously taking over fertile agricultural plots. In the last three decades, countries such as Colombia and Ecuador in South America and Kenya and Ethiopia in Africa have become leading suppliers of fresh-cut flowers to the world. Each nation has witnessed a complete transformation of its agricultural model, from an artisanal practice that focuses largely on local food provision to a capital-intensive model driven by agro-industrial complexes. While significant investments have been made in the necessary infrastructures of industrial flower production for a global market—namely, new roads and airports that guarantee a continuous “chilled delivery chain”—such investment stands to benefit private enterprise alone. Few in the design professions and allied fields have considered how such investments in the hinterland provide a framework to improve urbanism along agro-industrial and resource-extraction corridors—especially how they might improve the general quality of life outside private enclaves.

Lastly, the consistent urbanization of areas in between cities with exceedingly dispersed settlements—the “metapolization” of the hinterland, as defined by French urbanist François Ascher.<sup>4</sup> This case is particularly extreme in geographies such as the Ecuadorian and Peruvian Amazon River Valley, where new mobility infrastructure, paired with oil-extraction sites, is creating an extremely light—almost pulverized—urban grain. As a consequence, permanent forms of settlement crop up. Many of these settlements remain much longer than the extraction process itself, and heavily damage ecologically delicate geographies.

While the reemergence of the urban project is to be commended, the design disciplines affiliated to city-making must now also rethink how to expand beyond the bounds of the consolidated metropolis. As few spaces remain untouched by urban development, the challenges of scale and synthesis force designers to rethink the urban project today—particularly in the context outside the realm of the metropolis. It surely does not necessitate architects to become economists or ecologists. On the contrary, the challenges posed by the mega-region and beyond require architects to work across scales and contexts, to make new and inventive uses of architecture’s valuable tools: model and scale. ♦

## ENDNOTES

1. Paradoxically, there has been an increase in the number of post-professional degree programs in North America, with many offering some form of specialized knowledge of the challenges facing contemporary design practice—particularly at an urban scale.
2. The first phase of the High Line, a collaboration between landscape architecture firm James Corner Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro, was completed in 2009. For more information, see Busquets, Joan and Felipe Correa, *Cities X Lines: A New Lens for the Urbanistic Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2006), 126–129. [[F: Edits OK?]]
3. Acciavatti, Anthony, “Changes of State: Slow-Motion Trauma in the Gangetic Plains of India,” *Architectural Design* 207 (2010): 44–49.
4. Ascher, François, *Métapolis ou l’avenir des villes* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1995)